

# National Poetry Month Featured Poet: CA Conrad

written by Entropy | April 28, 2014



We're continuing with our [National Poetry Month](#) daily poet interviews, and today's featured poet is CA Conrad! Stay tuned all month for more featured poets.

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1) Do you think poetry is still important, relevant, and vibrant in today's culture?

Poetry is very important, always relevant. People get upset about poems which is evidence of its importance. This morning I received 4 angry emails about my new (Soma)tic poetry ritual and resulting poem in *The Sensation Feelings Journal*, [a new piece where I read tarot cards to meat in grocery stores](#).

And I thought, HEY the magazine is called *SENSATION FEELINGS Journal* so who am I to judge the sensate of the feeler? What I also find interesting is that with [another recent piece I wrote about drone attacks](#), NO ANGER!! As soon as I write about hamburgers though, look out!! But maybe it's because most people agree with me about drones or, as I prefer to call them Flying Killer Robots. It's the poet's job to listen very closely to the power structure, hear how they're using our language against us, like the OM / DRONE connection, for instance. Freud said, "Everywhere I go I find a poet has been there before me." That's no small thing to find poets everywhere.

We're a threat to the shell game of democracy and we always have been. No one can ever convince me that Plato wanted us removed from the city limits simply because we dabbled in the occult and wrote poems about Aphrodite. No, I don't buy it. I think the poets were in Plato's face after one of his speeches about HOW TERRIFIC slavery is for the Republic. His precious Republic of slavery is alive and well today, BUT SO ARE THE POETS!! We're not going anywhere, oh no we're not!!

I think this question gets asked because it's easy to measure poetry against other forms of media. But poetry isn't replaceable. Other forms of media are fine, but poetry pits the culture against itself in ways no one expects. For instance a big glossy gay magazine asked me for a poem, a particular poem, one where I'm referring to an irritated homophobic neighbor who is tired of hearing me fuck my boyfriend every night. But no, I wanted them to publish the new piece where I question the positive aspects of gays in the military at a time when we're killing three children a day in Afghanistan. I mean IS IT really a civil liberty to put a rainbow sticker on a machine gun and kill Arabs with impunity? The gay "community" allows us to question the dominant culture, but not from within, as though we're beyond reproach. Well poets don't think anyone is exemplary not even other poets, which is why we fight

all the time. I often remind myself of Anselm Berrigan saying that his mother (Alice Notley, obviously) told him when he was a kid that everyone fought at the Poetry Project because they cared. That's beautiful, I love it!! We fight because we care. Thank you Alice Notley!!

## 2) What makes you want to write poetry?

Oh, I'll quote Alice Notley again, "Poetry's so common hardly anyone can find it." I bank my life against this statement she makes in her poem "C' 81." Do you know this poem? My mother hates poetry but loves this one. My mother and I lived in a car some years ago when I was a kid, tough times, and [this poem made my mother cry](#) from the recognition Notley has for the poor.

Trust me when I say I know how grand this sounds, but poetry saved my life. It really did. And I know how nearly impossible it is that I'm a poet having come from where I come. No one reads, let alone reads poems where I grew up. It's a rural factory town where I'm from and it has everything to do with your question because I wanted to have nothing to do with the factory. My family is severed from the reality of being vital creative beings, the factory extending itself outside the factory walls and into every aspect of their lives, shutting them down, robbing them of the joys of being human. My aunt Darlene retired nine months ago and died three months ago, drank herself to death. She couldn't bear having to think a new way away from her machines she tended day after day, year after year.

So I moved as soon as I could and became a poet. And I felt pretty sure of myself, living with likeminded creative people. Then in 2005 I went back to rural Pennsylvania for a family reunion and discovered on the train ride back home that I had turned my poetry into a factory. WOW!! This was a crisis. At first I wanted to trace my steps to remembering how I could have allowed this to happen, this assembly line of production, but then I just wanted to stop, quit. And I did for the better part of a month. One morning I woke and started writing down my list of all the problems with the factory, which was a very long list. At the top of the list was "inability to be present." That's the morning I created (Soma)tics, rituals I do to write that when I'm doing one I can't possibly be anywhere but where I am when I'm doing it. An extreme present is what they are. Nine years into doing these my life is completely altered. I'm a new person, I'm a person I had no idea I was capable of being or even wanted to be, or knew how to be. I'm present in most things now is what I mean to say here, and can listen with stronger ears and with honed attention. There are so many things I could attribute to this new life, but [\(Soma\)tic Poetry Rituals is the main reason](#).

## 3) Tell us about one poet who has greatly influenced you as a writer and thinker.

Eileen Myles. Her work came to me as a teenager at a time when I had a drug dealer boyfriend and was headed nowhere but jail, or the grave. I woke up in the middle of this pile of bodies, one of those parties in the 80's where everyone was so high we were dancing until we were all naked and crazy. It was a depressing morning, looking around. I do believe in guardian angels. There was a stack of magazines and books in this apartment and I pulled

Myles's book *SAPPHO'S BOAT* out of the stack. To this day I wonder about that, that pulling. How do these things happen? Do you know this book? That opening poem changed my life, and I read the whole book, then put on my clothes and went out into the world, changed. I was already a poet, already deeply in love with poems, but no one made me get my shit together AND WANT TO LIVE like Eileen Myles did that morning. My guardian angel said, "GET THAT BOOK" and it was blue. Blue hits the human optic nerve first, but still, I think about a stack of shitty magazines and I don't know what the other books were. I'm glad I picked it out of the stack and read it that dark and creepy morning.

4) Tell us about one lesser-known poet who you'd like more people to know about.

HEY, I love this question!! I asked Eileen Myles this years ago in an interview and her answer changed my life so much that I created [THE NEGLECTORINO PROJECT](#) where I asked other poets the same question. This project makes me happy because I learned about so many amazing poets, it was a gift to myself and everyone.

But I want to repeat Myles's answer: Susie Timmons. Her books *LOCKED FROM THE OUTSIDE* and *THE NEW OLD PAINT* will blow your fucking mind and if they don't then get a doctor, quick, because something's wrong!!

5) How do you feel about poetry in the age of social media?

FANTASTIC!! I love being able to access a poet's latest poems instantly. I grew up in a dirty little illiterate country town before the Internet. It was awful. The library was deficient in every conceivable way and I always felt like the only person in there besides the sleepy librarians. My relationship with Emily Dickinson was very special though as a result, having such few choices, and I got to fall in love with her poems in a way that might not have happened with heavier access to the world of poetry. But still I LOVE the idea of kids today where I grew up able to see your magazine for instance.

6) Share with us one of your recent poems and tell us a little bit about its context.

My new piece [YOU DON'T HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BE MY NEMESIS](#) is one I'd like to talk about. One interesting detail that I don't mention in the prose of the ritual before the resulting poem is the class makeup of the would-be nemeses. They were all upper-middle class, or rich. For instance the first one I mention, the one who ripped my book up on stage, wow! A couple of years after his stunt we were thrown together in a group reading for a magazine called *American Writing*. He read an essay about how his mother is a doctor, his father a lawyer, and his two brothers are a doctor and a lawyer, and how he is the poet screw-up failure of the family. It made perfect sense immediately to me why he hated me so much. Here I was this working class poet, a Nobody by his family's standards, and I was getting published, and worse, having fun!! I loved poetry, and didn't hide that love!! He hated me so much because his parents were breathing down his neck about what a failure he was and what

a waste of time poetry was and here I came making out with my boyfriend in the back of the poetry reading and starting little magazines and poetry reading series. Oh he hated me. Class is the worst thing for art. If you're like me and come from poor people art can be this MIRACLE surprise and it's all gravy really because you never expected to do anything or go anywhere, but if you come from money your parents usually want you to be replicas of them. In many ways I'm grateful for coming from the white trash I come from, never bothering me, never demanding I go to law school. Poems, I love poems. And I've been through too much for anyone to be my nemesis, so don't waste your time trying.

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 **CAConrad** is the author of seven books including *ECODEVIANCE: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* (Wave Books, 2014), *A BEAUTIFUL MARSUPIAL AFTERNOON* (WAVE Books, 2012) and *The Book of Frank* (WAVE Books, 2010). A 2014 Lannan Fellow, a 2013 MacDowell Fellow, and a 2011 Pew Fellow, he also conducts workshops on (Soma)tic poetry and Eco-poetics. Visit him online at <http://CAConrad.blogspot.com>